

## Shabbos / Yom Kippur - Moshe Dovid Spitzer

י תשרי תשע"ה – 3 October 2014 – שבת ויום כיפור

### Modim – to thank or to bow?

On Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, one of the highlights of davening is כורעים, when we bow on the floor and dedicate ourselves to the service of Hashem. This is something we are not very used to – people can easily be distracted: by making sure their cloth is on the ground neatly, or that they don't kick their neighbour (or perhaps more importantly don't get kicked themselves).

In Oleinu, we bow and say “ואנחנו כורעים ומשתחווים ומודים”, “we bend, bow and מודים”. What exactly is the translation of מודים? I would like to offer a suggestion - maybe מודים means “bow”:

ואנחנו כורעים ומשתחווים ומודים	
Traditional translation:	We bow, bow and <b>THANK</b>
My suggestion:	We bow, bow and <b>BOW</b>

Why should this be correct? Well, there is another place in davening where we use the word – in Shemona Esrei, when we say “מודים אנחנו לך”. Here too, maybe it makes sense to translate מודים as “bow” – after all, we do actually bow when we say those words!

מודים אנחנו לך	
Traditional translation:	We <b>THANK</b> You
My suggestion:	We <b>BOW</b> to You

People might rightly object to this suggestion: מודים means to thank – it has nothing to do with bowing. It just so happens that both times we say מודים (in Shemona Esrei and in Oleinu), we bow; but there are plenty of other times we say מודים and don't bow at all!

But actually: the Meiri (Brochos 34b) translates the phrase in Shemona Esrei as “we bow to You”. He does not mention the phrase in Oleinu, but why not apply the same translation there? It would actually be more consistent – the phrase would contain three synonyms for bowing – “korim / mishtachavim / modim” – “bow / bow / bow”, rather than “bow / bow / thank”.

This is even clearer in the Mussaf of Yom Kippur, where מודים appears in a string of synonyms for bowing. When the Kohen Godol said the Name of Hashem, the people would:

כורעים ומשתחווים ומודים ונופלים על פניהם bend, bow, מודים and fall on their faces
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(See also Shulchan Aruch 281:1 who records that some people had the custom to bow during נשמת, at “לך לבדך אנחנו מודים”, but dismisses this practice saying we should not bow except in the places indicated by חז"ל.)

### Modim – the impossible bow

However there is a problem. The Gemora (e.g. Brochos 34b) says that “כורעים” means to kneel, and “משתחווים” means to lie with limbs outstretched. If so, we can't translate the “מודים” in Oleinu as “bow” – because after saying “כורעים ומשתחווים”, we are already (figuratively) at the limit, arms and legs outstretched; there is no way we can bow further!

Maybe this can be resolved with the following suggestion. As servants of Hashem, we are expected to serve Him with all our ability. We are not expected to do more than our best, but we are expected to do no less. As we read in פרקי אבות (ב:טז) – “לא – “עליך המלאכה לגמור ולא אתה בן חורין ליבטל ממנה”. Nevertheless, we must realise that whatever our best efforts are, Hashem is so great that He deserves to be served much, much better than we can ever manage.

When we bow during Oleinu, and we say the first two words, “כורעים ומשתחווים”, we have bowed and are (figuratively) lying on the floor with arms and legs out. We are at the utmost limit of our submission to Hashem: yet at this moment, we still say “מודים” – we express that even though it is impossible, we still want to bow even further.

Maybe thinking about this new explanation of the words will enhance our כוונה during this moving part of davening.

לזכר ולעלוי נשמת הרב אברהם שמואל בנימין ב"ר משה מרדכי ז"ל  
In memory of my uncle Rabbi Benny Spitzer, whose tenth yahrzeit falls during Sukkos

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To write a Sedra Sheet: Speak to Avi Friedwald or Elliott Della or email [sedrasheet@northhendonsukkos.co.uk](mailto:sedrasheet@northhendonsukkos.co.uk)

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